



Marine litter: What role for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)?

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Event Report



Vast amounts of plastic enter the oceans each year, with unforeseeable consequences for the environment and biological life. Marine litter has become the most visible and most alarming side effect of the linear plastics economies. Rising pressure on policymakers to tackle the marine litter problem has put the spotlight on apparently easy solutions but marine litter can only be effectively tackled by implementing circular economy solutions on all levels worldwide. It requires a shift in mindset and the implementation of circular economy principles, such as Extended Producer Responsibility. This Conference took place during the European Week for Waste Reduction, was co-chaired by **MEPs Fredrick Federley, Jytte Guteland and Maria Spyra** and organised in collaboration with the **EPR Club**.

The panels included:

Opening

- **MEP Fredrick Federley**
- **MEP Jytte Guteland**
- **MEP Maria Spyra**
- **Jyrki Katainen**, Vice-President of the European Commission
- **Françoise Bonnet**, EPR Club Secretariat

Panel 1: Marine Litter: “EPR as driver of the circularity of packaging”

- **Silvija Aile**, Deputy Head of Unit, Waste Management & Secondary Materials Unit, DG ENV
- **Françoise Bonnet**, Secretary General, ACR+
- **Helmut Schmitz**, Director Communication-Public Affairs, DSD
- **Miguel Muñoz**, Libera Programme Coordinator, SeoBirdLife
- **Sara Güemes Santos**, Libera Programme Coordinator, Ecoembes
- **Delphine Lévi Alvarès**, European coordinator of the #BreakFreeFromPlastic movement, Zero Waste Europe

Panel 2: Micro Plastics: “EPR as a driver of sustainable product design”

- **Mauro Scalia**, Director Sustainable Businesses, European Apparel and Textile Confederation
- **Oliver Loebel**, Secretary General, EurEau
- **Stephane Arditi**, Policy Manager on Circular Economy, Products and Waste, European Environmental Bureau
- **Susanna Gionfra**, Policy Analyst, Institute for European Environmental Policy

In her introductory remarks, **MEP Jytte Guteland** pointed out that the problem of marine litter is transboundary by nature and cannot be solved by Europe on its own. She referred to previous Intergroup events addressing the impact of marine litter on fisheries, the role of biodegradable plastics and highlighted the global ocean governance processes within CBD and the links to the SDGs. Ms. Guteland stressed the actions taken by the European Commission during the last months by tackling plastic marine litter with its Proposals on the Plastic Strategy, a new Directive on Port Reception Facilities and Single-Use Plastics (SUP). Moreover, she invited the audience to exchange ideas with key stakeholders to jointly address plastic pollution in our oceans.

MEP Fredrick Federley highlighted that the Intergroup brings together different political parties within the European Parliament to actually make a real change. He underlined the international dimension of the debate, stressing that Europe should reflect on how a rich continent can help improving waste collection and recycling in other parts of the world. Secondly, he highlighted the potential of the European market, as the biggest in the world, to set standards in the way of using plastic. Finally, he showed that a lot of the exported European plastics contribute to marine litter elsewhere. As a result, Mr. Federley concluded that a transition and a set of international standards regarding the use of plastics and marine litter are not only possible and very much needed.

MEP Maria Spyra agreed that a strong and stringent policy approach to tackle marine litter is needed. From her point of view, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is one key mechanism to achieve a truly circular economy, which aims to achieve environmental improvements throughout a product-life cycle, and two primary environmental goals. Firstly, EPR should provide incentives to manufacturing eco-design, and secondly to ensure effective end-of-life collection and improving reuse and recycle. Last but not least, Ms. Spyra stressed the need of working jointly on the policy design that will allow allocating the potential of EPR mechanisms to change the status quo.

Following the above, **Françoise Bonnet** on behalf of the EPR Club Secretariat thanked the MEPs for hosting this timely and crucial discussion. The EPR Club was founded in 2012 and offers a unique multi-stakeholder platform for an exchange on EPR in Europe, gathering representatives of all actors of the value chain and all different types of products, including packaging, from all EU countries. According to Ms. Bonnet, the EU has seen the value of the EPR Club and its contribution to a technical implementation of the EPR mechanism. Concluding, Ms. Bonnet called out on the EU institutions to continue the support of the EPR Club for the important platform it provides.

In his keynote speech, Vice-President of the European Commission **Jyrki Katainen** highlighted the important role of the Intergroup and its contribution in providing a wider perspective on the circular economy. To him, two megatrends will be important in the economy within the next years; artificial intelligence and circular economy, which should also be emphasised in the work plan of the future Commission. At global level, the Commission always supports the mention of EPR in international fora. Mr. Katainen further stressed that the discussion should always be seen in the context of the SDGs, especially SDG 14 (Life Below Water) and SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) that play a key role when addressing the topic of the conference. Surveys clearly show that marine litter is of high concern for European citizens, and that they want to see political action. In this line, the EU Plastic Strategy is turning “a challenge into a positive agenda for the future of Europe”. It aims at all plastic packaging to be recyclable by 2030, calls for a reduction in the consumption of single-use plastics, and contains a clear restriction of the intentional use of microplastics. Mr. Katainen also highlighted that the proposals target the unsustainable use of plastics, and should be seen as a win-win deal for the environment and the economy.

The first panel moderated by Jytte Guteland was dedicated to the topic of Marine Litter: “EPR as driver of the circularity of packaging”. To begin with, **Silvija Aile** from DG ENV highlighted the very ambitious EU waste legislation, which came into force in July this year. Its measures regarding waste prevention and management are directly linked to the prevention of marine litter. Member States now have to take measures to guarantee that there is no additional

marine litter entering the environment. In relation to EPR, Ms. Aile highlighted a set of ground rules, which are composed of two elements. Firstly, the producers pay the full cost of waste management regarding their products. Secondly, the fees in relation to a product should reflect the waste management impact of the product. Moreover, as mentioned within her intervention, the SUP Proposal aims to improve the prevention and collection of out-of-home waste in accordance with the “polluter pays principle”.

Thereafter, **Françoise Bonnet** provided the public authorities’ point of view. Firstly, she pointed out the essential role of collection infrastructure given that 80% of the marine litter is land-based litter and 60% of post-consumer plastic waste consists of packaging. The role of municipalities is to offer comprehensive collection services to their citizens (notably for all packaging, not just a fraction of it), while the role of the producers is to reimburse the related costs. Secondly, EPR should be understood in the broadest way – it is not about placing the burden only on the producers, but rather focusing on their key role in the system, as they are responsible for the design both of products and of their packaging. Finally, Ms. Bonnet sees a clear need to raise awareness and drive behaviour change in a quick and efficient manner, through the use of economic and legal instruments. These would allow to give more value to recyclates (for instance through clear obligation for use of recycled plastics into new products) or to create the right incentives for consumers not to litter (through deposit-refund systems). According to Ms. Bonnet, the SUP Proposal provides a very good opportunity to be ambitious and make a change.

Helmut Schmitz introduced Der Grüne Punkt Duales System Deutschland, which represents the oldest EPR system worldwide. Mr. Schmitz welcomed the joint initiative of promoting EPR as a key element of the solution in the fight against litter. Within his [presentation](#), Mr. Schmitz initially pointed out that EPR is a key lever for the circular economy, however he emphasized that “the best plastic waste is the one which does not arise in the first place”. The eco-design of packaging is one important action to close the loop of materials. Secondly, “EPR will not work in isolation”, thus he highlighted the need for a joint action along the value chain. Holistic solutions and knowledge sharing are essential to bring the market and the environment in line for the future. Finally, Mr. Schmitz stressed Europe as home and inventor of EPR and concluded that further EPR developments should be based on the experiences and the knowledge available in Europe.

Bringing the NGO perspective to the discussion, **Miguel Muñoz** presented in his [intervention](#) the work of SeoBirdLife and the Liberia Programme, in which an EPR company (Ecoembes) and an NGO address litter jointly. As mentioned, building up on scientific data is the solid ground of the programme. After experiencing the support of the public in spotting birds through a mobile application, the Liberia Programme uses the same method to quantify and identify litter along beaches and rivers throughout the year. The second phase of the Liberia Programme aims at investigating the impact of plastic litter on the environment through the examination of different biological samples. Presenting the point of view of the EPR Company in the Liberia Programme, **Sara Güemes Santos** addressed the floor as Programme Coordinator for Ecoembes. With reference to the latter, the objective of this programme is to prevent littering and to raise awareness within the local population.

Delphine Lévi Alvarès advocating for the #BreakFreeFromPlastic movement at Zero Waste Europe stressed in her [presentation](#) her views on the links between circular economy, EPR and the waste hierarchy. The waste hierarchy starts by preventing waste, continues with incentivising reuse, then supports recycling and is constituted at the end by the disposal of waste. To her, current EPR had focused too much on recycling instead of preventing waste. Ms. Levi Alvares furthermore stressed the problem of light-weighting of packaging, which is badly collectable and hardly recyclable. “Harmonized European guidelines are needed to implement small and closed loops, reusable containers and efficient recycling methods”, she concluded.

Following the above interventions, **MEP Maria Spyra**ki moderated the second panel of the event, which gathered stakeholders to discuss on the topic of *Microplastics: “EPR as a driver of sustainable product design”*. **Mauro Scalia**, Director for Sustainable Businesses at Euratex, introduced to the problem of microplastics released while washing of synthetic textiles. He stressed that it is essential to know where the microplastics come from to tackle the problem properly and that an agreed harmonized test method is essential for this. To this purpose, he quoted the progresses of the [Cross-Industry Agreement](#) between EURATEX, FESI, EOG, CIRFS and A.I.S.E. in bringing together worldwide scientists to collaborate. Regarding EPR system, Mr. Scalia stressed that circular economy key needs in textiles are rather on costs and technical challenges whereas the sector EPR experiences show it can make sense only if actors in the value chain can be connected. Mr. Scalia moreover highlighted three key points; the need to work based on facts and scientific data, circular economy has already well started in textile and clothing and needs ways towards a systemic change, and last but not least that Europe, as part of a global and interconnected world, should not push the problem outside its borders, but should rather find a solution to inspire and serve as a best practice.

Oliver Loebel from EurEau started his [presentation](#) by referring to the European Treaties as the basis of the European legislation. He stressed Article 191 (2) of the Lisbon Treaty, which formulates the “polluter pays principle”. In line with the mentioned article, he stressed the need to control the pollution at the source. According to Mr. Loebel, measures to tackle the issue could be eco-design, innovations or limitations of fibre emissions.”Source control is always more important than trying to remove pollution at a later stage”. According to Mr. Loebel, the producers are in charge of source control, because they have the proper expertise on designs and products’ tests. In conclusion, he stressed that the “polluter pays principle” should be applied, rather than the “water consumer pays” principle.

Representing 150 NGOs under the umbrella of the European Environmental Bureau, **Stephane Arditi** [pointed out the gap between the call for eco-designs and the reluctance of implementing basic standards](#). Mr. Arditi warned the stakeholders not to pretend to be too enthusiastic about the circular economy, while simultaneously not changing anything. EPR is part of the solution to set some eco-design requirements and provide sufficient information to the consumers, regarding the chemicals contained by the clothes and the micro fibres emission of them during a washing cycle. Microfibres as the main contributor to the microplastics pollutions could be reduced by 30- 60%, while there is the urgency to act on the design and manufacturing stage instead of trying to depollute.

Last but not least, **Susanna Gionfra** introduced in [her presentation](#) the research of IEEP regarding the potential role of EPR to make a change at a design stage. According to Ms. Gionfra, EPR schemes could be made more ambitious if the aim is to make a change towards a circular economy. Furthermore, she pointed out that financial incentives are key elements to trigger the change. Ms. Gionfra also motivated the audience to look at the bigger picture; “it is important to keep in mind the rate of fragmentation of products on land and in water as well as knowing the product groups which most need to be tackled and the design criteria that should be applied”. By applying the example of plastic films used in agriculture, Ms. Gionfra stressed that “there are actually more microplastics in the soil than in the water, and we shouldn’t forget that”.

During the Q&A session that followed, the issues of research and innovation of new materials was addressed. There has been a call for giving producers the chance to create and investigate on biodegradable materials. On the other hand, plenty voices stressed the risk and disadvantages of focusing just on research and innovations. Developments could be slow, as well as mislead the consumers’ behaviour. Therefore, the necessity to find a balance between the problem’s urgency and the need for scientific data for the solutions was stressed by the panel. All speakers agreed on the need to raise awareness within the group of consumers.

While addressing the closing remarks, MEP Maria Spyra [summarised the outcomes of the event](#). All speakers agreed to the need of a policy approach to address marine litter and to use EPR as a mechanism to tackle the problem on its

root. Providing incentives to the manufacturers is essential to design resource efficient products. Furthermore, Ms. Spyraiki named some disadvantages of EPR, for example the general lack of data; something that has to be tackled soon. The plastics strategy is one first and hopefully joint answer of the European Commission and the European Parliament to raise awareness within the group of consumers, as highlighted by Ms. Spyraiki. Now all actors need to work together, simplifying the common message and connecting EPR systems within Europe to achieve better results.

[Documents](#) and the [complete web-streaming](#) of the event can be found under the respective links. Moreover, a highlight video of the event is available [here](#).